

Developing Learning Organizations at the Small Unit Level

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Much has been written on the topic of the Army as a learning organization. The focus has primarily been on the Army as a whole organization. The necessity of becoming a learning organization, successes and failures as a learning organization and the strategies for change have all focused on a top-down approach to becoming a learning organization. The purpose of this paper is to examine the characteristics of a learning organization, and how to apply them at the Army battalion level to optimize a unit's ability to innovate, adapt and succeed in a complex environment. In doing so, leaders at the smaller unit level can parallel Army efforts to becoming a learning organization and better prepare their units for the future during an "era of persistent conflict" and the conduct of "full spectrum operations".

The current world environment demands the Army foster learning and innovation to be successful. In Chapter 1 of its capstone manual FM 3-0 *Operations* the Army outlines an operating environment that is extremely complex. The Army has to be prepared to execute a wide scope of operations from civil support to high intensity conflict under any combination of numerous operational and mission variables. The permutations of possible operations are innumerable and dictate that in order for the Army to be successful it must be adaptive and flexible. It is fiscally unfeasible to develop a purely organizational or technological solution set of specialized units focused on a specific operation for every type of mission. Therefore, the Army must prepare its units and leaders to solve the problem sets associated with the missions they are given by teaching them to be adaptive, innovative and use critical reasoning.

The learning characteristics most applicable to the Army and its units are described by Morgan (2006) in his "organization as a brain metaphor". His model defines a learning organization as having the following capacities: a. The ability to scan and anticipate change in the wider environment to detect significant variations; b. the ability to question, challenge and change operating norms and assumptions; c. allowing appropriate strategic direction and pattern of organization to emerge; a. increase the capability to engage in double-loop learning versus

single-loop learning processes (Morgan, 2006, p. 87). Learning organizations must have leaders at all echelons that are skilled in detecting variations, defining problems and applying critical reasoning to solve problems and innovate in complex environments. An organizational commitment to developing these skill sets at all levels is required in order for an organization to build this capacity. It requires senior leaders to foster a learning culture within their unit and dedicate the resources needed to build, and more importantly maintain these capabilities throughout their organizations.

Another tenet of learning organizations is encouraging emergent organizations focused on effects instead of objectives. Traditionally organizational leaders provided objectives that were tangible measurements of performance through clearly defined outcomes. In doing so they limit subordinates creativity in how they approach their tasks. Guidance from above is still necessary but needs to be given in the form of organizational vision, values and reference points that guide behavior. Doing so creates the space necessary for subordinates to learn and innovate (Morgan, 2006, p.92). For an Army battalion this requires senior leaders comfortable in giving broad guidance focused more on the commander's intent and end state versus more prescriptive specified tasks. Success needs to be measured by less quantifiable measures of effectiveness versus tangible measures of performance. Senior leaders must avoid the urge to require easily definable and reportable metrics of objectives achieved and be content with a harder to quantify "feel" for the unit operating in accordance with the overall vision and values.

In order to be effective at learning, organizations must have the capability to conduct double-loop learning versus single-loop. "Single-loop learning rests in an ability to detect and correct error in relation to a given set of operating norms. Double-loop learning depends on being able to take a 'double-look' at the situation by questioning the relevance of operating norms" (Morgan, 2006, p. 85). An army battalion with only single-loop learning capabilities is one that only reacts to problems and finds solutions within their existing knowledge base and

procedures. Using double-loop learning processes enables a battalion to anticipate problems ahead of time by continually questioning procedures and approaches to their operations.

Holistically, the Army has had some recent successes in its attempts to become a learning organization, but it also has some identified areas that need improvement. Its ability to adapt and innovate the way it operates through almost nine years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq are a testament to its learning capability. Additionally, the doctrinal changes driven by these experiences reflect the Army's ability to codify and communicate its approach to operating in a complex environment across a full spectrum of operations. The new doctrine "sets a basic foundation for how to think about Army operations" as opposed to what to think. It also reflects how the Army is "trying to write doctrine for the world as it is rather than what they want it to be" (McClanahan, 2006 pg. 2). In Brown's article on the subject, General Petraeus highlights this new doctrinal approach by stating "The greater goal is to help our Army truly be a learning organization, one that is adapting in response to the challenges we face in the long war (and) one that strives to ensure basic combat competence, but also a degree of confidence in a number of the other tasks that our soldiers are asked to perform" (Brown, 2006, pg 1).

The Army's use of the After Action Review (AAR) is another highlighted success in its holistic attempts to become a learning organization. In his Harvard Business Review article for developing learning organizations Garvin presents the Army's AAR process as the prime example of an organization that establishes concrete learning processes for evaluating its operations (Garvin, 2006, pg. 2). When done correctly the process is extremely effective in determining the "why" of what happened in an operation and drawing lessons for what should be sustained and what needs to be improved. The results are codified and the unit's procedures are updated accordingly, resulting in a lasting learning effect. The challenge at the battalion level and below is training junior leaders to effectively conduct AAR's that are worthwhile. The

process is not intuitive to all and takes training and practice to perfect. It must be a focal point in junior leader development at the battalion level for it to be effective.

The Army still has barriers to becoming a learning organization that mainly revolve around its cultural mindset. Perceptions of toxic leadership and the lack of a culture of openness up and down the chain of command persist. In his article, LTC Gerras cites an Army Training and Leader Development (ATDLP) Officer Study that concluded junior officers “perceive top-down training directives and strategies combined with brief leader development experiences for junior officers that lead to a perception that micromanagement is pervasive” (Gerras, 2002, pg 3). Whether perception or fact, junior leaders feel their input is not valued and they are not involved in providing solutions and driving innovation in their units.

In his article assessing the Army as a learning organization, Dibella defines the Army’s military culture as “rewarding bravado and the projection of confidence from its leaders versus humility and the projection of uncertainty or ambivalence”. This value constrains the openness necessary to facilitate the free flow of information and ideas up and down the chain of command (Dibella, 2010, pg 9). This can only be countered by senior leaders who are willing to put their egos aside and embrace input from all levels and their commitment to developing their subordinates to provide it.

Senior leaders at the battalion level can utilize the existing mechanisms within their units to become better learning organizations. Leaders can achieve this by fostering learning characteristics, capitalizing on the areas where the Army as a whole has enjoyed success, and accounting for identified cultural barriers to learning. The following approach outlines a program that achieves this through junior leader development and senior leader role modeling at the battalion level.

A key step in developing innovative leaders is to re-focus the Officer and Non-Commissioned Officer Development Programs within the unit to include conceptual topics like critical reasoning, case-studies, problem-solving, as well as teaching them their role in providing input into the unit's learning processes. Too often these programs at the Battalion level are focused on teaching young leaders "what to think". They provide training on tactics, techniques and procedures or administrative actions (supply, personnel, etc). Important and necessary topics to be sure, but they also could provide an excellent medium for the battalion's senior leaders and mentors to teach young leaders "how to think".

Young leaders must understand two critical things if they are to have relevance in their unit's ability to learn and adapt. The first is that their input is vital, many times they are the ones experiencing the environment first-hand during an operation and they attain unique insights to the problems at hand. Additionally, in the case of Non-Commissioned Officers they usually have multiple experiences to draw from. They must be taught that their input is valued and necessary for success. The second thing they must learn is how to present their points and recommendations using facts, reason and logic. Too often emotion, reaction, and youthful exuberance taint the relevance of their input resulting in the dismissal of their information by more senior leaders. There is an art and science to presenting valid counterpoints, arguments and recommendations to superiors and we do not do a good enough job of teaching and mentoring our young leaders on how to do it correctly. Not doing so is as dangerous and has the same effect on silencing bottom-up feedback as toxic leadership. Young leaders who provide poor input and are disregarded have the perception that their senior leaders don't value their input because of their position and cease providing it. Conversely, if we teach young leaders how to think critically, develop logical concepts based on facts and reason and present them in a professional manner they will be well-received by their senior leaders, valued and more apt to provide their input to subsequent problems.

Units must account for learning behavior when developing standard operating procedures, battle rhythms, meeting formats for the unit. Systems that incorporate double-loop learning processes need to be installed into the recurring events that keep battalions running smoothly. Typically these events consist of senior leaders receiving updates and statuses on statistical information and performance indicators from junior leaders within the unit. In good units if there are problem areas the junior leaders will provide their analysis and recommendation and receive further guidance from the senior leader; this is a prime example of single loop learning. Senior leaders in the unit should require junior leaders to examine current approaches to problems in their areas of responsibility, challenging existing norms and procedures in doing so, and brief the results of their analysis during these battle rhythm events. The goal in doing this is two-fold. First, it uses these existing mechanisms to provide junior leaders opportunities to gain practical experience using the critical reasoning and problem solving skills senior leaders are trying to develop in them. Secondly, it is a forcing function to continually examine the unit's processes to ensure it isn't continuing to operate under the "this is the way we've always done it" mentality.

Senior battalion leaders need to develop a rewards system that fosters learning behavior within the unit. Written performance counseling and evaluations should account for a junior leader's ability to think critically and present solutions to complex problems. In his approach for making the Army a better learning organization LTC Gerras provides some interesting recommendations for changing the Officer Evaluation Rating (OER) structure to better account for how well leaders display learning characteristics (Gerras, 2002 pgs. 15-19). However, battalion level leaders can use the existing counseling and rating tools to achieve the same result. Initial counseling sessions should include the expectations of junior leaders to provide input and guidance on how to do so professionally. Interim counseling sessions must provide constructive feedback on the junior leader's demonstrated proficiency and guidance for improvement. Finally,

part of a junior leader's rating or "grade" must account for their competency in contributing to the learning of the unit and their potential to do so at their next higher grade.

Additionally, senior leaders must search for opportunities to publicly recognize junior leaders who have successfully contributed to innovation and learning within their organizations. This can be done informally, on the spot, by acknowledging a good recommendation from a junior leader providing positive reinforcement for the individual and a good example for others. Or it can be done formally for more significant contributions and innovations through awards presented in front of unit formations. Establishing a rewards system is only limited by the creativity of the senior leaders. What is important is for senior leaders to communicate their value of learning characteristics in subordinates, and consistently develop junior leaders to develop their skills by providing feedback, guidance and reinforcement.

Army organizations, especially at lower levels, very much take on the personality of the commander. Therefore, the importance of senior leaders being a "learning role model" is key. The battalion commander must provide the example and build consensus for the approach with his sergeant major, staff officers and company commanders. Setting the tone for the organization to become an effective learning organization requires an intense amount of patience and commitment. Part of developing abilities in junior leaders requires senior leaders to explain the "why" behind rejecting recommendations from subordinates. Too often, especially in time constrained environments, senior leaders summarily dismiss recommendations for sound reasons based on their better understanding of a problem or depth of experience. However, by not explaining the reasoning for rejection they create the perception among junior leaders that their contributions are not valued and miss an opportunity to better develop the subordinates own critical reasoning skills by explaining the logic behind the senior leader's decision. It is important to caveat that there will be situations, especially in a military operational environment, where this is simply unfeasible due to criticality of the situation. Senior leaders must mitigate the impact in

these situations by communicating that caveat when developing and counseling leaders ahead of time so they better understand when those situations occur and don't draw the wrong conclusions based on their perceptions.

It is important also for other senior leaders in the battalion, not just commanders, to take an active role in fostering a learning environment and developing junior leader skills. The sergeants major and two majors in a battalion can have a major impact. Typically they are outside the direct rating chain of junior leaders but are in positions of respected authority with junior leaders, a powerful combination. Their ability to foster learning characteristics among subordinates is critical because junior leaders don't feel as directly threatened when offering recommendations and receiving feedback to and from these leaders. Their role as "sounding boards" for the preliminary raising of ideas and recommendations within an organization therefore are critical. By acting as intermediaries and vetting officials they provide junior leaders with "low threat" but valued feedback on their ideas prior to raising them to the commanders whom they might perceive to be "grading" them on their contributions. Done correctly this approach combines to foster quality junior leader input and minimizes the amount of time the commander has to spend filtering out poor recommendations and explaining the logic behind rejecting them.

The Army has identified a clear need to become a learning organization in order to meet the challenges of a complex world and its ability to conduct a full spectrum of operations within it. It has made a concerted effort to achieve this goal with some success. However, a top-down only driven approach to transitioning the Army to a learning organization can not succeed by itself. Leaders at all organizational levels need to foster learning characteristics within their units for the Army to change as a whole. The approach outlined above utilizes existing mediums in place in organizations today but requires a commitment from senior leaders in the unit to

maximize a battalion's ability to innovate and adapt in a complex environment and in doing so helps the Army in its efforts to change.

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